

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions and Recommendations

[The true power of singing is that of] communicating ideas and passions and music through the medium of another human or group of humans. It is a very big idea: that singing enhances and balances lives and can be so powerful a force that people without it feel bereft and diminished (Chapman 2006:264).

This study investigated the Absa Internal Choir Festival to assess the suitability of choral singing as catalyst for transformation and teambuilding in a corporate environment such as Absa Bank. Unique to this study is the banding together of theories relating to organisational development (Chapter 2) and the inherent power in music and musicking (Chapter 3) for positive change. This affords a focused understanding of the potential role of music in fields not traditionally associated with music education.

In Chapter 4 Absa is introduced as an influential organisation in South Africa. Absa operates within all the economic, political and socio-economic realities germane to a young democracy in Africa. In a milieu characterised by persistent mergers and acquisitions, the history of the Absa Group is crammed with challenges related to transformation and the recurrent building of new teams. It is therefore particularly significant that the investigation of choir participation as a tool for transformation and teambuilding was undertaken within Absa Bank.

Steve Booyesen, Group Chief Executive of the Absa Group, is the originator of the Absa Internal Choir Festival. A prominent business leader in the country, Booyesen is renowned for his original thinking and ground-breaking approach to doing business in the South African corporate world. Booyesen is attributed with a number of pioneering initiatives in banking – ‘firsts’ in South Africa – which have impacted positively on the face and assets of Absa and profited the South African economy. An example of this thinking is the Absa alliance with an international banking force, the British Barclays Group. This was a milestone in South African banking business history.

The Absa Internal Choir Festival is one more such enterprise. Booyesen instinctively instigated a ‘very big idea’ when he initiated a choir project to promote teambuilding and fun, also serving as a supporting measure for Absa staff during the time of the merger with Barclays Bank. Booyesen (2007) expresses the belief that a balanced life is an important factor in the promotion of contented and productive employees. He envisaged the choir project as a platform for fun, social interaction and building relationships with fellow Absa employees of differing demographic backgrounds, cultures and positions in the bank. In contemplating what it is that constitutes a “soulful organisation”, Briskin and Peppers (2001:14) conclude that it is the intention and ability to balance and respect the inward complexity of each of its employees with the needs and values of the institution. In valuing balance in the lives of staff members, Booyesen (and Absa) have distinguished the bank as a soulful organisation.

In the development of the Absa Internal Choir Festival, a few meaningful links proved to be determining factors in the success of the project. These include:

- The choir project is the flagship of the Group Chief Executive of the organisation. Schein (1992:12) notes that cultural change is best possible when instigated by the leaders of a society, as ‘cultural architects’. A venture on this scale needs to be authorised and enthused by top management to secure success;
- Mostert, Project Manager for the Absa Internal Choir Festival, is a qualified music teacher with experience and understanding of choral music and choir-related issues. Further, prior experience gained through founding the National Eisteddfod Academy had afforded her considerable social and also cultural capital (as discussed in Chapter 4); and
- Mostert created partnerships with reputable external institutions to manage the music-related facets of the project. Such a partnership was formed in 2007 with the author, supported by her university through the Wits Enterprise. In this capacity she has been acting as external service provider to the project.

Responsibilities include composing the annual Absa song; presenting choral workshops and overseeing the training of the choirs; adjudicating semi-final competitions; conducting the massed choir and acting as musical director for the annual final event of the Absa Internal Choir Festival.

This unique combination of role players has collectively engendered the exceptional development of Absa's choir project thus far.

## 6.1 Conclusions

The main **research question** of the study was:

How and to what extent can choir participation be a successful tool for transformation and teambuilding in a corporate environment like Absa Bank?

**Sub-questions** also posed in Chapter 1 were the following:

- Based on current theories of the concepts, what is the meaning of transformation and teambuilding in a post-Apartheid South African society?
- To what extent are the values presented by the African philosophy of Ubuntu reaffirmed through choral singing and the Absa Internal Choir Festival?
- How does the process of developing an Absa choir link up with the concept of social capital in a corporate South African context?
- Which elements inherent in choral singing could be contributing factors to attaining extra-musical outcomes?
- To what extent does the Absa Internal Choir Festival achieve the outcomes envisaged from its introduction?

The research questions will now all be answered in the discussion which follows.

The literature review (Chapter 2) reveals that authentic transformation is a challenging process which involves changing a person's perceptions of fundamental truths about people and the world. Transformation of the individual is affected by transformation of his/her world. In post-Apartheid South Africa, a truly transformed society is unlikely to occur without transformation of human interaction and communication. Such interaction between people of different race and language groups needs to be initiated.

Since its inception in 2005, the AICF has accommodated significant interaction and communication between Absa employees of differing cultural and language backgrounds. Despite the inability of choir members to speak all the languages represented in the choirs, shared communicative experiences were facilitated through the music they sang together. As illustrated in Chapter 5, respondents have unambiguously reported increased understanding of and respect for choir members from dissimilar cultural backgrounds through singing together in an Absa choir. Graphs (pp 122-126) reflect the high scores allocated for improved cross-cultural relations experienced through singing in an Absa choir. Qualitative data (Section C) obtained through the questionnaire reflects that 6.2% of respondents viewed improved cross-cultural relations as the most important achievement of their choir, while 10.1% indicated that improved relations with members of other cultures was the most important personal benefit. Interviews recorded on the supplementary DVD further illustrate that participating in Absa choirs afforded Absa employees of different cultures opportunities to build relationships and teams with members of different cultures. In a society where this type of transformational change is sorely needed, these outcomes are particularly noteworthy.

The results of the questionnaire further show that the AICF successfully facilitated teambuilding amongst Absa choir members. It is important to note that the concept of 'team' in these choirs necessarily incorporates the notion of transformation in that these are multicultural choirs. One can therefore assume that, to at least an extent, results obtained for teambuilding contain elements of transformation.

Qualitative data obtained through Section C indicates that a significant number of respondents (41.22%) viewed teambuilding as the single most important achievement of their choir, while 28.7% reported that, on a personal level, learning to be part of a team and/or becoming a better team player was the most significant consequence of their choral experience. Many respondents particularly valued the sense of belonging which they experienced in the choir. This sense of belonging fulfils a deep need in human beings and counteracts feelings of alienation, of being an outsider and of not making a worthwhile contribution to society. Interviewees recorded on the supplementary DVD underscore the success of the AICF in regards to teambuilding.

The literature review (Chapter 2) further elucidates the Ubuntu philosophy of finding one's selfhood through others and argues that this viewpoint can aid in lessening people's natural resistance to change in South Africa. Booysen (2007) notes that "the choir has thrown together people and forced them to learn about each others' cultures". Interaction between Absa employees outside the working environment has been an objective of Absa's choir project. Ubuntu believes that relationships with others are influenced by exposure between self and others through occasions of informal interaction. Additionally, the sharing of cultural experiences and modes of communication from the others' lifeworlds through the singing of their songs - often in the unfamiliar mother tongue of the other – produce such influence on relationships with others.

Respondents have testified that the interaction that takes place through singing in Absa choirs change their perceptions of and relationships with 'the other'. Ubuntu predicts that this influence on the relationship will influence the humanness of self. The results of the questionnaire indicate that their perceptions of choir members from differing backgrounds/races/cultures changed through the choir.

Social capital considers the individual in terms of his/her trusting relations, interactions and networks with others and the community. Numerous AICF participants testified that the development of trusting relationships and cohesive 'choral communities' were products of singing in the Absa choirs. The outcomes of this study (Chapter 5) suggest

that the Absa Internal Choir Festival profitably invests in social capital through establishing networks of mutual trust and reciprocity.

Music is particularly renowned for its capacity to intensify emotions and unify groups of people towards a common goal. Singing holds numerous and wide-ranging benefits for the singer. Claims include:

- Singing increases lung function and breathing;
- Singing releases endorphins into the singer's system, thus elating his/her mood;
- Singing boosts the immune system; and
- Singing produces relaxation and stress relief.

Welch (2005:254) notes the following benefits of singing which are of particular interest to this study:

- Singing can be a form of group identification and social bonding. In choirs where significant diversity occurs, singing can also facilitate social bridging. Welch alludes to the use of “specially composed company songs” for reinforcing a senior management's definition of company culture. This is especially relevant to the Absa song, composed annually for the AICF;
- Singing can be a transformational activity culturally, through the fusion of elements presented in the music traditions of the diverse cultures within the choir;
- Singing can be used as an agent in the communication of social change.

The outcomes of this investigation clearly show that respondents experienced this capacity of music through participating in the AICF. There is a great need to unify South Africans of differing cultures toward an integrated society and future. The motivation for utilising the possibilities of choral singing to promote healing and nation building in South Africa are therefore exceedingly appropriate.

The overwhelmingly positive results of the questionnaire illustrate that the AICF serves as a lucrative resource for enjoyment and fun, corporate pride, improved interaction

between employees of different ethnic groups, teambuilding and unity, improved cross-departmental collaboration and a stronger belief that Absa values their staff as their most important asset.

Booyesen (2008 DVD: Scene 5) notes that the AICF has surpassed all expectations, clearly answering to the fifth research sub-question as to the extent to which the AICF has achieved the outcomes envisaged from its inception.

In concluding, the following comments by Booyesen dismiss any uncertainty that might still exist as to the suitability of choir participation as tool for transformation and teambuilding in Absa Bank:

When the idea of the choir was first floated, it was largely to give the employees of Absa the opportunity to have fun, socialise and get to know each other on a non-work related level. It has certainly achieved those three objectives, and so much more. The truth is: at the time we had no idea what was taking root. This initiative has transformed people's lives, produced lessons that, for all concerned, we could not have imagined. It has brought business benefits no training program could hope to imitate (2007 DVD: Scene 4).

The AICF, as Absa's daring venture to capitalise on the power of choral singing as an investment in their human capital, unmistakably demonstrates the suitability of choir to:

- 1) facilitate reciprocity between South Africans of differing cultural and language backgrounds, so promoting transformation;
- 2) smooth the progress of cooperation within the group/choir, so promoting teambuilding;
- and 3) improve individual and group wellbeing in more ways than could be envisaged when this study commenced.

## 6.2 Recommendations

The Absa Internal Choir Festival illustrates the extraordinary success of choir participation as a tool for transformation and teambuilding amongst choir members of different race, language, age and geographical groups. The data obtained through this investigation shows that, through building and maintaining the morale and team spirit of participating staff, the AICF serves as a source of support and inspiration for Absa employees. The author suggests a number of recommendations following the positive outcomes of this study.

- The success of the choir project and its positive effect on participating employees merit that Absa continues the choir project even in the face of the current global financial climate; and
- Absa's strong commitment to the arts and their staff is evident in the AICF. This could be aptly illustrated and publicised by showcasing audiovisual material of Absa choirs and the Absa Internal Choir Festival at events and television broadcasts of events sponsored by Absa, such as the Absa soccer and rugby cups and *Noot vir Noot*. This point will be put in writing and sent to the relevant departments and top management of Absa by the author.

Further, in the current South African society many people have become disillusioned by prolonged racism as well as a scarcity of harmonious neighbourliness and unity. This is perpetuated by serious challenges re poverty, crime, politics, health care and education. The outcomes of this study undeniably demonstrate that Absa has developed a successful concept for utilising choral singing as a meaningful tool for transformation, team and spirit building. In this regard the author proposes the following, and will do so directly to the Absa top management:

Absa would do well to bring the above to the attention of:

- Other major South African corporations;
  - Influential cultural role players in the country (including religious institutions); as well as
  - Those government departments where severe challenges have eroded the morale of public servants, such as the departments of Arts and Culture, Education, Correctional Services, Health and Police.
  - Based on the success of the project, the AICF can serve as a model for the above mentioned institutions to build the morale of South Africans and realise cohesion and nation building amid the rich cultural diversity typifying the country.
- Therefore:

As a prominent benefactor of social investment in South Africa, Absa should channel a portion of their social responsibility investment for promoting this model for transformation and team/nation building and provide mentorship for departments and organisations to implement similar choir projects. Absa can also commission songs composed to promote hope, inspiration and nation building with accompanying/backtracking CDs. The author intends to publicise this view by writing articles in both academic journals and more popular reading matter. Preliminary discussions with the AICF project manager have commenced in regards to the above. This suggestion, too, will be made to the Absa top management in writing by the author, together with a copy of this whole thesis.

The overwhelmingly positive results of the AICF investigation of choir participation as a tool for positive change certainly indicate that the eminence and role of choral singing in South African society could provide appealing and persuasive packaging for transformation and team/nation building in South Africa.

The investigation of the AICF as a means to increase employee pride in Absa (factor 2 - PABSA) uncovered a very interesting divergence between the age groups 40+ and 50+. These results could suggest that employees in the 40+ age group are more prone to competition-related stress, and that this has a negative impact on the ir sense of corporate



pride while the opposite seemed true of the 50+ group. As this could have significant consequences for work performance, a research study investigating this possible phenomenon could be of particular value to employers.

Further research examining the significance of specific music elements contained in the music sung in the AICF for promoting transformation and teambuilding would augment the scope of this investigation in the field of music education.